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INSIGHT

# Why is Violence Rebounding in Mexico?

November 8, 2017

Mexico's transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) have for years been identified as the greatest organized crime threat to the United States given their strong links to drug trafficking, money laundering, and other crimes. These organizations also generate extreme violence within Mexico, where they exercise territorial influence in large swaths of the country near illicit drug production hubs and trafficking routes and particularly where the TCOs clash to assert or maintain dominance.

Between 2008 and 2016, Mexico's homicide rate increased from 8 per 100,000 residents to 16.2 per 100,000. The Justice in Mexico Project at the University of San Diego has chronicled the rise in organized crime-related murders since the mid-2000s, and it estimates that up to half (80,000-100,000) of all intentional homicides since 2006 have been organized crime-related killings. According to the annual Justice in Mexico report, violence is widespread, with 24 of Mexico's 31 states experiencing an increase in homicides last year.

In 2017, homicides have continued to spiral upward. Preliminary statistics for January through September show an increase of 20% to 30% over 2016. If this trend continues, Mexico will end the year with a homicide rate above 18 per 100,000, which would make 2017 its most violent year on record. A number of factors may be driving this spike in violence, including continuing fragmentation of the Sinaloa Cartel, competition to meet the burgeoning U.S. heroin demand, and ineffective law enforcement efforts against TCOs, such as the removal of key crime kingpins.

## Fragmentation of the Sinaloa Cartel

The year 2017 began with Mexico's extradition to the United States of Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán, alleged kingpin of the internationally integrated crime syndicate known as the Sinaloa Cartel. Sinaloa had dominated the Mexican drug trade for decades under Guzmán's leadership, competing violently with other TCOs and smaller parts of his own federation of drug trafficking organizations that broke apart in 2008. Guzmán's followers fought off the Mexican security forces and used violence and bribery to elicit cooperation, and he succeeded in pulling off two dramatic prison escapes in 2003 and 2015. His re-arrest in early 2016, however, led to increasing infighting as rival organizations eyed his vast empire reportedly built on proceeds from trafficking South American cocaine and locally sourced methamphetamine, marijuana, and heroin to the U.S. market.

By 2017, the formerly dominant Sinaloa Cartel started to break into factions, with inter- and intra-organizational tensions spawning increased violence. Cartel Jalisco New Generation (CJNG) directly

**Congressional Research Service**
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IN10812

challenged its former allies in Sinaloa, which it split from in 2010, and also directly confronted the Mexican government in several key states.

According to the 2017 National Drug Threat Assessment (NDTA), the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) maintains there are six predominant Mexican TCOs competing for trafficking drugs into the United States today:

- Sinaloa, the hegemon in Mexico's criminal landscape but under pressure in recent years;
- CJNG, Mexico's fastest growing TCO with an expanding presence in several U.S. cities;
- Juarez, a traditional drug trafficking group that has been revived with Sinaloa's seeming decline;
- Beltrán Leyva, one of the cartels that split from the Sinaloa federation in 2008, but remains cohesive;
- Gulf Cartel, one of Mexico's oldest crime groups; and
- Los Zetas, composed originally of Mexican military deserters, now largely disaggregated in violent factions.

There are also newer entrants into Mexico's organized crime landscape that lack the manpower or management skills for full-scale drug operations spanning multiple countries. They are fighting for control of particular regions where they can demand extortion payments, steal oil from pipelines (causing losses topping $1 billion in 2016), dominate the local drug trade, or commit other violent crimes.

## Increase in Heroin Production

According to DEA, increases in Mexico's opium poppy cultivation led to a tripling in the amount of heroin produced between 2013 and 2016 (estimated to have risen from 26 to 81 metric tons). This was due in part to a reported 15% decline in opium crop eradication in 2016.

In the 2017 NDTA, DEA warns that Mexican TCOs present an acute threat to U.S. communities given their dominance in heroin and fentanyl exports (fentanyl is a synthetic opioid 30 to 50 times more potent than heroin). The report notes that Mexico's heroin traffickers, who traditionally provided black or brown heroin to U.S. cities west of the Mississippi, began to innovate and changed their opium processing methods to produce white heroin, a purer and more deadly product. Although East Coast U.S. cities had been dominated by Colombian heroin traffickers, in recent years, the heroin business has shifted, with certain Mexican TCOs, especially Sinaloa and CJNG with the largest geographic reach, moving into that market. According to DEA, 93% of heroin seized in the United States in 2015 came from Mexico and a growing proportion of fentanyl has also been sourced from Mexico.

## Kingpin Strategy Appears Ineffective

As drug-related crime began to climb in 2007, and drug gangs battled Mexican security forces and one another with increasing brutality, some strategies adopted by the Mexican government have not proven effective at least on a sustainable basis. The rebound of killings in 2017, despite the removal of more than 107 of Mexico's 122 most violent top criminals, suggests that those leaders are replaceable. Organizations fragmented but did not disappear, and, instead, experienced deadly combat until a new leader (or two) replaced the former boss resulting in new groups emerging. Corruption, a perennial problem in Mexico, has been entrenched with enormous drug profits that traffickers use to bribe officials. Mexican authorities have not succeeded in capturing a significant portion of the proceeds accrued by traffickers. Some analysts are concerned that successful bilateral security cooperation, including extradition of criminals wanted on charges in the United States, may diminish due to tensions rising in other aspects of U.S.-Mexican relations.

For more background, see CRS In Focus IF10400, *Heroin Production in Mexico and U.S. Policy*; CRS Report R41349, *U.S.-Mexican Security Cooperation: The Mérida Initiative and Beyond*; CRS Report R42917, *Mexico: Background and U.S. Relations*; and CRS Report R41576, *Mexico: Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking Organizations*.

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